

# China–Latin America Military Engagement:

## Good Will, Good Business, and Strategic Position <sup>1</sup>

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### **Introduction**

It is often said that Chinese engagement with Latin America is primarily “commercial” in nature. While true, the focus on the commercial dimension of the relationship conceals the fact that, over the past several years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has also expanded its military ties with Latin America in multiple, important ways, consistent with its own public declarations of intention.<sup>2</sup>

Since the granting of port concessions in Panama to the Hong-Kong-based firm Hutchison Whampoa in 1999, Chinese military engagement with Latin America has been one of the most broadly discussed, but misunderstood dimensions of PRC activities in the region.<sup>3</sup> The PRC’s military initiatives with Latin America are arguably not the largest or most strategically significant part of its rapidly expanding interactions with the region. Nor do they visibly threaten the United States or undermine pro-Western regimes in the same fashion as Soviet military engagement with Latin America during the cold war. It is, however, significant, growing, and continues to be a key to the evaluation by U.S. decision-makers whether the Chinese presence in Latin America constitutes a strategic threat to the interests of the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze PRC defense and security ties in Latin America. It is divided into three sections: (1) Objectives of PRC defense and security engagement with Latin America, (2) Manifestations of that engagement, and (3) Conclusions.

### **Objectives of PRC Defense and Security Engagement with Latin America.**

While the PRC has publicly professed its interest in expanding military linkages with Latin America, it has given very little explanation of its reasons for doing so, or how its military activities fit into its broader engagement with the region. In the spirit of Chinese thinkers such as Sun Zi, PRC military initiatives in Latin America should be understood as subordinate to, and in support of, long-term PRC national objectives in the region. In general, these objectives involve promoting and protecting China’s re-emergence as a major global actor.

The imperatives and risks involved are a product of the export-led growth strategy that the PRC has pursued and refined since 1978:<sup>4</sup> securing access to reliable sources of primary products, in support of manufacturing activities and capital formation, assuring the ability to feed the Chinese population as it both urbanizes and consumes more protein, establishing and protecting markets for Chinese goods, as its producers continue to expand production and move up the value-added chain, securing access to technology and global information flows, maintaining a presence in institutions key to China's global economic transactions, and avoiding the consolidation of an international coalition opposing the "rise" of the PRC.

Chinese military engagement with Latin America supports each of these imperatives, albeit often in indirect ways, which contrast to the manner in which Western countries historically look at the military as an instrument of national power.

These imperatives may be inferred to be as follows:

1. Building goodwill, understanding, and political leverage
2. Creating the tools to protect PRC interests in-country
3. Selling Chinese products and moving up the value added chain, and
4. Positioning the PRC strategically in the region

***Building good will, understanding, and political leverage.*** For the PRC, military engagement is one tool, among many, for building political good-will and leverage in a country, in order to make it more likely that the regime will not oppose the entry of Chinese products or act against its investments. Military activities are useful in this context because the armed forces remain an important political actor in most Latin American countries, although thinking of the military as a political instrument is also consistent with both Chinese communist and pre-communist philosophy.

Knowing and being on good terms with the military leadership of a Latin American country helps the Chinese to understand the overall political dynamic of that country, anticipate actions that could be taken against PRC commercial interests, influence the political leadership through military friends where necessary, and anticipate or avoid actions that could be taken by the armed forces in the political arena that could impact Chinese interests.

***Creating the tools to protect Chinese Interests in-country.*** As Chinese companies and businessmen expand their physical presence in Latin America, they will experience a corresponding increase in the security challenges to people and operations that have confronted the companies of other countries operating in the region, including kidnapping, extortion, and violence associated with strikes, political protest, and terrorism. Chinese petroleum and mining firms operating in remote areas are particularly vulnerable, as seen by violence against Andes Petroleum and Petroriental in the north of Ecuador in 2006<sup>5</sup> and 2007.<sup>6</sup> Cultural differences between the Chinese and local populations are also likely to contribute to tensions and increase the possibilities for violence, as seen in the 2007 truckers strike against Chinese shopkeepers in Buenos Aires,<sup>7</sup> or the November 2004 violence against Chinese communities in Maracay and Valencia, Venezuela.<sup>8</sup>

In the near term, PRC companies will have to rely upon Latin American police and armed forces, as well as private security and the payment of protection money, in order to avoid harm to Chinese personnel and operations. Nonetheless, as the value of Chinese investments in the region and the resource flows from it grow, the PRC will have an increasing incentive to coordinate with and improve the functionality of these security forces, and to ensure that the protection of Chinese personnel and operations receives priority.

Indeed, the PRC has already demonstrated a willingness to use its military to protect its commercial interests in Africa, citing threats to these interests as justification for deploying naval forces to conduct anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in December 2008,<sup>9</sup> and its use of military assets to evacuate almost 36,000 Chinese personnel from Libya in March 2011.<sup>10</sup> There is also already an ongoing debate within the PRC regarding the best ways to protect Chinese commercial operations, including discussions by retiring PLA military officers to form private security companies to support commercial ventures abroad.<sup>11</sup>

**Selling Chinese Products and Moving Up the Value Added Chain.** Although Chinese military exports are relatively small by comparison to other goods, they contribute to PRC national development in multiple ways. As with other commercial products, military products generate export revenues for Chinese companies such as the defense conglomerate NORINCO, and sustain employment. Sales of non-lethal military goods such as clothing and personal equipment in Latin America by Chinese companies, for example, are an often overlooked, but non-trivial business. Such sales also sustain the health of the

PRC defense industrial base, and help it to advance its technical capabilities in support of national defense goals. This is particularly the case with respect to high-end goods such as radars, aircraft, armored vehicles, and other sophisticated military end items or “dual-use” commercial goods, where sales in Latin America help China to test, prove and refine its capabilities under field conditions in strategically important sectors.

***Positioning China Strategically in the Region.*** Chinese decision-makers, as others around the world, recognize the implications of the emergence of the PRC as a principal global actor, including the possibility that it may have to one day fight a major war involving not only Asia, but other theaters of operations in which it has interests, or where it might wish to hold its would-be adversary at risk. While there is nothing to suggest that the PRC desires or anticipates such a struggle in the short term, it is reasonable to anticipate that its military strategic thinkers are preparing for the possibility. To this end, China’s military ties in Latin America afford geographically-specific benefits, such as collecting intelligence on the operation of US forces, creating diversionary crises or conducting disruption operations in close proximity to the United States.

In general, as this section has suggested, the course taken by Chinese military engagement with Latin America in the medium or long term is likely to differ significantly from that witnessed with respect to Soviet military activities in the region during the Cold War. In general, the PRC is more likely to refrain from overtly provocative activities, such as the establishment of bases with a significant Chinese presence, overt military assistance to groups trying to overthrow a regime, unilateral military intervention in the region in a contested leadership situation, or participation in anti-US military alliances.

### **Manifestations of Chinese Military Engagement with Latin America**

Chinese military engagement with the region may be understood in terms of five interrelated types of activities: (1) meetings between senior military officials, (2) lower-level military-to-military interactions, and (3) military sales.

**Meetings Between Senior Military Officials.** Based on official visits documented in the press, the number of visits by senior Chinese defense officials to Latin America, and visits by their counterparts to China, has increased over the past several years. The press accounts of the agendas of these visits suggest that the purpose is often to establish or strengthen relationships, including not only exchanging views on security matters, but

also to discuss or finalize agreements for arms purchases, military exchanges, or other contacts and transactions.

In the second half of 2010, the number of high-level military-to-military contacts was particularly high, including nine visits at the Minister of Defense or Chief of Staff level between senior Chinese military officials and their Latin American counterparts, including Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. In 2011, the Defense Ministers of Peru (May), Chile (June), and Bolivia (December) visited China, although Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie refrained from visiting Latin America during the year.

Although little of the substance of the discussions during these visits makes it to the open press, their role in advancing military relationships between China and the Latin American counterpart nation have arguably been greater than is generally recognized: Such visits allow the leaders involved to build familiarity and confidence by speaking face-to-face, and to explore possibilities for future projects, from arms sales to expanded military exchanges. In some cases, initiatives prepared prior to the trip by staff officers or other officials are ratified during the high-level visit, while ideas generated during discussions become initiatives to be subsequently explored, administratively driven by the declared interest of the senior leadership.

**Lower-Level Military-to-Military Interactions.** In the past several years, the PRC has expanded the quantity and scope of its military-to-military contacts at the institutional level, including its ongoing participation in the peacekeeping mission in Haiti and an increasing number of personnel exchanges for training and education, joint exercises, institutional visits, and symbolic activities. In each of these, the primary value for the PRC is arguably building relationships at the institutional level, as well as at the personal level with future key figures in Latin American militaries. In the process, it has also been able to increase its understanding of Latin American militaries and the security environment of the region.

In Haiti, military police **from the Peoples Liberation** Army continue to serve as part of the United Nations peacekeeping force (MINUSTAH) present in the country. Chinese peacekeepers have had a continual presence in Haiti since the first contingent was deployed in September 2004. Haiti also has the dubious distinction to have been the site of the first officially-recognized Chinese military casualties on Latin American soil. Eight members of the PLA were among the personnel killed in Haiti in January 2009, in conjunction with the earthquake that devastated the country.<sup>12</sup> Four of the Chinese killed were

members of the MINUSTAH police force, while the other four were part of a six person working group from the Ministry of Public Security which was visiting the United Nations headquarters facility when its roof collapsed because of the earthquake.<sup>13</sup> The bodies of the victims were subsequently returned to the PRC, where they posthumously received various honors.<sup>14</sup>

The participation of the Chinese military in MINUSTAH for more than six years has arguably yielded great benefits for the PRC. It has given the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and hundreds of its soldiers first-hand experience in operating in the Latin American environment in a police and security role—something which will be of particular value in the future if China begins to provide security assistance to allies in the region in support of the protection of its nationals and ongoing operations. In addition, its presence in MINUSTAH has allowed the PLA to better understand and build relationships with the militaries of Brazil and other nations working alongside it in the operation, even while fostering good-will in the region toward the PLA as a contributor to the international order. Finally, the Chinese presence in Haiti has also arguably advanced its campaign to internationally isolate Taiwan, since it puts pressure on the government of Haiti, which currently affords diplomatic recognition to Taiwan, rather than the PRC.<sup>15</sup>

In the realm of training and military education, Chinese institutions host Latin American military personnel from at least 18 states in Latin America--virtually every country in the region with which the PRC has diplomatic relations. The examples listed in the following paragraphs are illustrative, although neither a complete, nor necessarily a representative list:

The National Defense University of the PLA has multiple institutions offering courses in both English and Spanish to Latin American officers. These include

1. The Defense Studies Institute in Changping (near Beijing), a school especially for foreigners within the broader university, offering courses in both Spanish and English.
2. The Army Command College, located in Nanjing, offers a four month course in English and French, which has been attended by military officers from Latin American countries including Colombia, Peru, Barbados, and Jamaica, as well as Africa and other regions.
3. The Chinese Navy Command School, outside of Nanjing, offers a year-long senior command course in English. The course has been attended by Latin

American military officers, among others, including officers from Uruguay,<sup>16</sup> and Brazil.<sup>17</sup>

- A facility near Shijiazhuang, which has offered a five-month course on special forces operations at the tactical-operational level, attended by officers from Uruguay, and perhaps by members from other armed forces.

4. The Center of Military Instruction of the PLA offers a course on martial arts which has been attended by Chilean Marines, among others.

In parallel with these, and other programs, Latin American militaries also hosted Chinese officers. Examples include the following:

1. For several years, beginning in 2005, the Chilean Army language school hosted two Chinese professors for the Mandarin Chinese language,<sup>18</sup> although as of December 2011, these instructors were no longer present.

2. In 2006, during a visit by a delegation from the Chinese National Defense University, the Chilean war college ANEPE signed an agreement regarding officer exchanges and collaborative activities, although it has not yet been ratified.

Chinese collaboration with Latin American militaries on education and training is increasingly extending to tactical-level programs as well. During the November 2010 meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie and Colombian Defense Minister Rodrigo Rivera, an expansion of Sino-Colombian military exchanges was agreed to, including the establishment of 10 places for Colombian generals and colonels in Chinese military academies, and the sending of Colombian trainers to China for courses in sharpshooting, combat diving, survival, and riverine combat.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, during General Liang's September meeting with Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim, expanded cooperation between the two countries in the area of basic training was discussed.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to opportunities for building personal relationships and gathering intelligence, such tactical-level courses also help the PRC to develop military capabilities in areas which may be useful in working more directly in the region's unique operating environments.

An additional element of China's construction of military relationships with Latin America is institutional visits. Such visits typically involve more people, but are much shorter in duration than training exchanges. Although the opportunities to develop personal ties are by necessity more superficial, such

institutional visits allow the PRC to reach larger groups of personnel whose work touches many others, such as military professors and mid-grade officers, while also building or strengthening institution-to-institution linkages.

Examples include the following:

- Visits between Chinese and Chilean naval officers have occurred on an occasional basis since July 1996, but increased to one or two per year starting in 2005.
- In Argentina, there has been a similar increase in recent years, including visits by Chinese officials to the Argentine National Defense University and the senior war colleges.
- In Colombia, delegations from China's National Defense University visit the nation's war college on an annual basis.

Beyond institutional visits, other ongoing contacts between Chinese and Latin American militaries include a visit to the Caribbean by China's first hospital ship, as well as port visits by military training ships and warships from each side to the other.

From September through November 2011, China's recently commissioned hospital ship, designated "Peace Arc" made its first visit to the Western Hemisphere, making port calls in Havana Cuba, Kingston Jamaica, Port of Spain Trinidad, and Puntarenas, Costa Rica. In the process, the PRC demonstrated its readiness to follow the US example in the region in using its military assets as a tool of humanitarian diplomacy.

With respect to training ships and other warships, the first such visit was made by the Chilean Navy training ship "Esmeralda" to the Port of Shanghai in 1972. By 2009, the Esmeralda had made 10 trips to Chinese ports. Reciprocally, in April 1997, the first Chinese naval flotilla visited Latin America. It included the missile destroyers Harbin and Zhuhai and the logistics ship Nancang, and made a port calls in Mexico, Peru, and Chile, as well as the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor.<sup>21</sup> The most recent such visit, at the time of this writing, came in 2009 from a Chinese naval flotilla which included the destroyer Shijiazhuang and the supply ship Hongzehu, making port calls in Valparaiso, Chile, Callao Peru, and Guayaquil, Ecuador.<sup>22</sup> Although non-threatening in character, such visits benefit the PLA Navy, helping it to identify requirements for the use of Latin American ports by its ships in the future for maintenance, resupply, or other purposes.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to bilateral contacts, such as those mentioned above, Chinese and Latin American militaries have occasional contact through conferences and other forums. The Chilean and Chinese navies, for example, have regular contact through the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, with the PRC having supported Chile's admission to the organization.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, military-to-military contacts also have come to include joint exercises. In November 2010, 39 Chinese military personnel participated with 50 Peruvians in the humanitarian exercise "Angel de la Paz," including deployment to the village of Villa Maria del Trunfo to perform medical services for the local population.<sup>25</sup> The joint exercise simulated a response by the two armed forces to an earthquake, with an associated chemical fire,<sup>26</sup> and was tied to the donation by the PLA to the Peruvian military of a mobile field hospital, and training of the recipients on its use in the facilities of the 1st Special Forces Brigade in Chorrillos, near Lima.<sup>27</sup>

While not threatening in and of itself, Chinese participation in a humanitarian exercise in Latin America may be understood as a logical step toward its participation in the response to an actual disaster, outside the framework of a multilateral force such as the United Nations.

**Military Sales to Latin America.** As with military sales by other countries, Chinese military sales to Latin America help the PRC to strengthen its ties with the purchasers by meeting their specific needs, and by tying those nations to Chinese logistics, maintenance and training infrastructures. Such transactions also help the PRC to develop and sustain its own national defense industry, and earn export sales revenues.

In general, PRC military sales to Latin America have followed the pattern of its commercial sales. The first Chinese defense goods sold in the region were relatively inexpensive, unsophisticated items such as military clothing and personal equipment. In some cases, such goods entered Latin American militaries as donations, such as the \$1 million dollars per year in hats, gloves, and other non-lethal equipment donated by the PLA to Colombia. Frequently, Chinese goods have been offered by third party importers licensed to do business with Latin American militaries.

As with commercial goods, China's ability to sell sophisticated military hardware to Latin America has been impeded by concerns over quality and its ability to maintain and support the equipment in the field, particularly with respect to goods such as ships, aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons and communication systems, in which lives on the battlefield could depend on their

proper functioning. The lack of a Chinese military presence in the region has compounded such concern; the absence of sales of Chinese gear in Latin America meant that Chinese military goods were “unproven” in the region, and thus more difficult to sell. Moreover, without a Chinese military presence in the region, maintenance and obtaining spare parts for Chinese goods was, in the minds of many leaders, a great risk.<sup>28</sup>

Despite such obstacles, as in the commercial realm, with time, the PRC and its defense companies have begun to move up the value added chain to sell increasingly high value-added military goods in Latin America. In doing so, it has leveraged opportunities provided by regimes hostile to the US, such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, whose political orientation and inability to acquire Western military technology has led them to look to Chinese equipment.

The first major breakthrough for the PRC in selling military sales to Latin America was arguably Venezuela’s 2008 announcement that it would purchase of K-8 (Karakorum) aircraft.<sup>29</sup> Venezuela’s decision to purchase the aircraft was driven in part by its inability to purchase U.S. fighters, or spare parts for its existing fleet of U.S. aircraft, as well as successful U.S. efforts to block other Western countries from selling to Venezuela similar aircraft that incorporated U.S. technology.<sup>30</sup> The agreement to ultimately purchase a total of 18 K-8 aircraft from China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation (CATIC), along with armament and a supporting logistics package, was made in August 2008. In the second half of 2009, 11 Venezuelan pilots and 56 technicians were sent to China for training on the aircraft as pilots and maintenance and logistics support staff.<sup>31</sup>

The first 6 K-8s were officially received in March 2010,<sup>32</sup> with the other 12 arriving in August. They were assigned to the 12th fighter Air Group, based at the air base Rafael Urdaneta de Maracaibo, and to the 15th Special Operations group, at the air base Vicente Landaeta Gil de Barquisimeto.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the Venezuelan military leadership has also been evaluating the more capable Chinese L-15 Air King, with a proposal by Hongdu Aviation Industry Corporation to sell the PRC 24 of the aircraft.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond fighters, the government has also declared that it will purchase 10-12 Y-8 Chinese medium military transport aircraft, each capable of carrying up to 88 persons or 20 tons of cargo.<sup>35</sup>

With the support of the political leadership of Hugo Chavez, purchases of Chinese equipment by the Venezuelan armed forces also expanded into other

areas. In 2005 the Venezuelan air force acquired JYL-1 radars, usable for air defense from the firm China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC), at a cost of \$150 million.<sup>36</sup> The radars were acquired by the Venezuelan organization Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares (CAVIM), with the first delivered in January 2008, subsequently put under the command of the Venezuelan Air Force.

The Chinese also installed a command and control center for the Venezuelan radars, in a military base near Caracas, at the end of 2008. Between April and August of the same year, Venezuela sent a total of 70 officers to the PRC for training on the operation and maintenance of the system.<sup>37</sup> By mid-2009, the Venezuelan military leadership was referring to a total of 10 Chinese radars being operational.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to direct purchases of military goods and systems from the PRC, Venezuela has greatly facilitated the ability by the PRC to sell its military end items to other, like-minded governments in the region, including both Ecuador and Bolivia. Following the lead of Venezuela, in September 2009 Ecuador negotiated a deal with the PRC for two radars, manufactured by China Electronics Technology Corporation (CETC), to be deployed to its northern frontier with Colombia for evaluation, with the option to purchase an additional four units.<sup>39</sup> Although there were problems with the suitability of the first radars for the operating conditions that they encountered, in August 2010, the Ecuadoran government announced that it was going ahead with the purchase of the four additional radars, at a cost of \$80 million.<sup>40</sup> In addition, as of December 2010, Ecuador was considering the purchase of two Chinese MA-60 transport aircraft, although as of December 2011, no progress had been made on these deals.

Finally, the PRC has also donated military trucks and ambulances and other non-lethal goods to Ecuador. Indeed, during the February 2010 visit by General Varela to the PRC, China mentioned that they planned to double such donations.<sup>41</sup>

Like Ecuador, Bolivia has also followed the lead of Venezuela in acquiring military equipment from the PRC, purchasing 6 K-8 aircraft, shipped to Bolivia in kits and assembled in a maintenance facility in Cochabamba.<sup>42</sup>

Although the K-8s are Bolivia's first fighters, they are Bolivia's second transaction with the PRC involving aircraft for its military. In March 2007, Bolivia announced the leasing of two MA-60 military cargo and passenger aircraft from the PRC, as part of a larger deal that included the acquisition of

military transport aircraft from Venezuela.<sup>43</sup> The Chinese MA-60 aircraft were paid for by a \$38.3 million loan from the PRC and delivered in February 2008. Its third major purchase was a \$300 million deal, approved by the Bolivian parliament in February 2012, to purchase 6 dual-use Chinese H425 transport helicopters, for use by the Bolivian state petroleum company YPFB.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to its purchase of end-items, Bolivia has also received a series of donations of other military goods from the PRC. These donations have come in four major installments: In December 2006, the PRC announced the donation to Bolivia of twenty-five person assault craft, infantry and artillery munitions, night-vision goggles, and Kevlar helmets.<sup>46</sup> In 2007, the Bolivian armed forces received 34 trucks from the manufacturer First Auto Works (FAW), five busses, three Toyota Land Cruiser SUVs, and a tow truck.<sup>47</sup> In February 2009, it received 2 gunboats from the PRC.<sup>48</sup> In March 2010, it received 27 busses for military transport, manufactured by the Chinese company Hinger, 21 Nissan light trucks, and 40 Yamaha outboard motors.<sup>49</sup> Beyond these items, over the period 1987-1996, the PRC also reportedly provided 10,000 AK-47 assault rifles,<sup>50</sup> in addition to having donated motorcycles, bicycles and other gear to the Bolivian police.

Although the most significant arms transactions between the PRC and Latin America have come in the “socialist” countries of the ALBA block, significant advances and near-advances have occurred in other countries as well.

In 2009, Peru almost became the first nation in Latin America to make a major purchase of armored vehicles from the PRC. A series of 5 Chinese MBT-2000 tanks were accepted from the PRC for evaluation by the Peruvian army, and were featured prominently in a military parade in December 2009.<sup>51</sup> The purchase was canceled at the last minute because of problems with the supply of the Ukranian-made engines for the vehicles.<sup>52</sup>

As noted previously, in 2010, Peru was also the recipient of the first major donation of military humanitarian equipment from the PLA, with the delivery of a mobile field hospital and other equipment during the second half of 2010, with a total value of \$300 million, including training of Peruvian personnel on the equipment, and culminating in a joint Chinese-Peruvian humanitarian exercise in November of that year. At a lower level, Peru has also purchased Chinese non-lethal equipment, and in 2007, signed defense accords with the Chinese to allow them to participate more directly in the Peruvian military acquisition system.<sup>53</sup>

Peru has not, however, been the only US ally in the region to consider major purchases of Chinese military equipment. Since as early as 2006, Chinese military officials have discussed the possibility of selling armored vehicles and other equipment to the Colombian military. To date, Colombia has not pursued such transactions, in part due to concern over complications in the maintenance and support of such equipment, and also because of the close Colombia-US defense and security relationship.

Beyond explicit military sales, both the Uruguayan police and the Peruvian National Police (PNP), and perhaps other police forces in the region, have also explored purchases of Chinese equipment. The police force in Montevideo, for example, has purchased police cruisers of the Chinese brand Geeley.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in August 2007 the PNP contracted with a South Korean intermediary for the purchase of 700 Geeley police cars.<sup>56</sup> As with the military sales, however, the transaction came under significant public scrutiny, and was eventually canceled.

At a lower level, the Colombian military has also been the recipient of approximately \$1 million per year of non-lethal equipment, including gloves and winter hats to equip Colombian high-mountain battalions, and affirmed and deepened that relationship in November 2010 with the signing of a defense cooperation accord.<sup>57</sup> and in November 2011, raising its annual donation to \$1.5 million.

Beyond the aforementioned countries, Costa Rica is also a strong candidate for the receipt of Chinese equipment and other assistance for its security forces. In November 2010, during a visit to Beijing, Costa Rican Prime Minister Rene Castro made a formal request to China for assistance in training and equipping its national police for operations against narcotrafficking.<sup>58</sup> In September 2011, China announced the donation of 200 police vehicles to the country.<sup>59</sup>

Other countries in the region have also flirted with the possibility of acquiring significant military material from the Chinese. In 2008, the Argentine Joint Staff purchased four WMZ-551 armored personnel carriers from the Chinese manufacturer Norinco, as part of its contribution of a mechanized battalion to the joint Argentine-Chilean peacekeeping force “Cruz del Sur.” Argentina paid \$2.6 million for the vehicles, including a training and spare parts package.<sup>60</sup> The APCs initially saw service in Gonaives, Haiti, where the Argentine mechanized battalion was deployed as part of the UN peacekeeping force MINUSTAH.<sup>61</sup> In the end, however, numerous problems with these vehicles led Argentina to suspend their procurement.<sup>62</sup>

More recently, in 2011, Argentina was reportedly evaluating the purchase of Chinese helicopters,<sup>63</sup> which it had first considered in 2007, but did not pursue at the time.<sup>64</sup>

In the case of Brazil, which has its own well developed defense industry, there have been no significant purchases of Chinese military hardware. Nonetheless, the possibility of China-Brazil co-production of such items was discussed during the September 2010 meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie and his Brazilian counterpart Nelson Jobim in Brasilia.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, PRC donations of military equipment to Jamaica in January 2011 deserve mention. The delivery of \$3.5 million in non-lethal goods, principally uniforms and tents, but also including helmets, binoculars, backpacks, and bulletproof vests to the Jamaica Defense Force (JDF)<sup>66</sup> was significant because it came at a time when the small and overtaxed Jamaican security forces are evaluating new ways of dealing with narco-violence such as that which killed 73 persons in May 2010 in operations in and around the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood in Kingston.

Finally, PRC military sales to non-state actors in the region also deserve mention, although this study found no evidence that such sales were done as official Chinese policy. A significant portion of the military-caliber weapons purchased by narcotrafficking organizations in Mexico are Chinese in origin, albeit purchased through third-party arms dealers.<sup>67</sup>

## **Conclusions**

From a US national security perspective, the most important dimensions of China's military engagement with Latin America have to do with how the relationship is evolving as the PRC pursues its arguably legitimate national security interests, while remaining attentive to the United States. Chinese military interactions with Latin America, in and of themselves, are not necessarily a problem. Nonetheless, China-Latin America military engagement means that the U.S. will find its freedom of action in the region constrained in ways that were not the case in the past. Latin America increasingly has other options, beyond the U.S., for its security cooperation, arms purchases, and personnel training. This is likely to change how the region's governments bargain when it comes to access to bases, intelligence sharing, combined operations, and permission for US direct action in the region, particularly in areas such as counterdrug and counterterrorism operations.

Based on its behavior to date, it is likely that the PRC will continue to expand its military engagement with Latin America, including exercises, visits, and arms sales, which will increase in volume and sophistication, building on the demonstration of its equipment in the ALBA countries to introduce end items into the mainstream arms market of the region. In following this course, although the PRC will likely remain highly attentive to the US response, they are also likely to become bolder over time, particularly as the current 4<sup>th</sup> generation of Chinese leadership is superseded by younger leaders who have grown up in a PRC that is an accepted political and economic power, confident of its place in the world.

***What the US should do?*** Growing Chinese military contacts with Latin America are an understandable part of the expansion of the PRC as key global actor with global interests; although the example of Japan suggests that it a country that builds its economic power on international commerce in the modern era does not necessarily have to develop military ties with the states with which it trades, in order to defend its interests.

As a longstanding military partner to Latin America, the United States has an opportunity to forge a new type of relationship with countries of the region, to help them leverage the opportunities and avoid the pitfalls that engagement with the PRC presents. Indeed, as an integral part of the region through geography, economic, and human ties, the United States has an obligation to itself and to its neighbors in Latin America to do so.

Because of the importance of the US for the PRC as a source of technology, and as a market, and because of the damage that animosity with the US could do to the economic and technological development of the PRC, Chinese leaders have traditionally been very sensitive to U.S. responses to their initiatives. The PRC is unlikely to bow before US demands, yet the character of the US response, among other factors, will shape how the PRC and its companies behave in Latin America, and the pace at which they proceed.

At the same time, the U.S. should avoid launching a modern version of the “Monroe Doctrine,” telling the PRC to “stay out” of the region. Although such rhetoric might play well politically, and although it might induce China to proceed more cautiously in the short term, it would also work against US strategic interests by strengthening the hand of more conservative forces in the PRC, and by fueling accusations in Latin America that its powerful neighbor to the north is “once again” trying to interfere with their sovereign right to maintain relations with whom they choose.

In addition, trying to prevent the PRC from establishing military ties with Latin America would also deny the US some of the real benefits that may be realized from Chinese military engagement with the region. To the extent that it proves reliable, for example, Chinese military hardware and supplies, in addition to training programs, may provide the region with cost-effective ways to meet security needs in the face of serious threats, such as those posed by transnational criminal organizations.<sup>68</sup> Cooperation between the PRC and Latin American police forces with data and personnel exchanges and translation support, could be of great benefit in combating the activities of mafias operating in Latin America, with ties in the PRC, such as the organization Red Dragon, with its involvement in human trafficking networks in the region,<sup>69</sup> or in stemming the flow of precursor chemicals from China to cocaine laboratories in the Andes and Amazon jungle.<sup>70</sup>

In addition it is also important for the U.S. to work for greater transparency with regard to those activities, and to engage the PRC in a positive fashion regarding their activities in the hemisphere, including regular dialogue and the establishment of mechanisms for resolving misunderstanding, such as the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue on Latin America.<sup>71</sup>

Overall, it is important for the U.S. to forge its response to PRC military engagement with the region in strategic terms, considering both the long-term implications of Chinese actions, as well as how that response and the way in which it is perceived affects the US position among the countries of the region. Chinese military engagement with Latin America is likely to be a growing and enduring part of the regional dynamic. How the US adapts to, and acts to shape that reality will have profound implications for the future security environment of the region, and the position of the U.S. within it.

## Notes

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